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Public Statement

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Bangladesh: Attack on Dr Humayun Azad -- government should bring to justice those responsible

Amnesty International strongly condemns the attack by unidentified assailants on the leading Bangladeshi writer and Dhaka University lecturer, Dr Humayun Azad, last Friday night. The attack has left Dr Azad in a critical condition. It is believed to be connected to the death threats he received following the publication of his recent novel about religious groups in Bangladesh who collaborated with the Pakistani army during the 1971 independence war.

Amnesty International calls upon the Government of Bangladesh to institute an independent and impartial investigation by a competent authority into this attack and to bring to justice those found responsible. It further urges the government to ensure the safety and security of Dr Azad's family who reportedly continue to receive threatening calls.

There has been widespread concern about the attack in Dhaka. Students groups have held protests against this attack and there have been reports in the Bangladeshi press that police and ruling party activists attacked and injured scores of protestors yesterday. Amnesty International is concerned by these reports; it urges the government to bring to justice those responsible, and to prevent future attacks.

Four opposition parties have called for a general strike on Saturday to protest against the attack on Dr Azad and to seek the punishment of those who were involved. Amnesty International urges the Government of Bangladesh to ensure the safety of anyone engaged in a protest event including the participants of the general strike on Saturday. The government must give clear instructions to the police that under no circumstances should they resort to attacking peaceful demonstrators. The Government must also ensure that activists of the ruling party are prevented from attacking demonstrators.

The attack on Dr Azad highlights the vulnerability of individuals engaged in the peaceful expression of their views regarding the activities of extremist religious groups in Bangladesh. Amnesty International calls upon the Government of Bangladesh to respond immediately and effectively to any calls for protection made by writers or journalists who fear such attacks.

Amnesty International is also concerned about the highly politicised statements, allegations and counter-allegations of responsibility made by the government and the main opposition party in relation to this attack. Such statements, before the facts are known, could divert the course of justice and allow those responsible for the attack on Dr Azad to evade punishment.

Background

Dr Humayun Azad was attacked on 27 February while he was waiting for a rikshaw to go home after

leaving a national book fair. He went into a coma after he was stabbed three times by unidentified assailants, who also detonated a home-made bomb which sent people running for cover and allowed the assailants to flee. The exact motive for the attack is not known, but family members believe it was carried out by religious groups who had been reportedly sending death threats to him. Threats were reportedly made against him after the publication of his book "Pak Sar Zamin Saad Baad" ('the first line of the Pakistani national anthem'), a story based on religious groups in Bangladesh who collaborated with the Pakistani army during the 1971 independence war. He is reportedly in a critical condition and is being treated at a military hospital in Dhaka. His family is reported to have been receiving threats from unknown callers telling them not to seek legal action against those responsible for the attack.

According to reports in the Bangladeshi press, religious groups had been agitating against the publication of the book and lobbying for the introduction of a blasphemy law to ban such publications.